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Politics

Tangled Web Of Campaign Cash Connects Hawaii To Maine

Tens of thousands of dollars in contributions have flowed from a Hawaii defense contractor, his family and employees to a Maine Republican senator.

By Nick Grube / February 7, 2020 [Share Article](#) 10
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WASHINGTON — A Honolulu-based company that received an \$8 million contract for defense work in Maine appears to be linked to a mysterious campaign donation made to a super PAC backing U.S. Sen. Susan Collins in her bid for re-election.

That donation, which came through another Hawaii based entity — the Society of Young Women Scientist and Engineers LLC — is now the subject of [an official complaint](#) before the Federal Election Commission that alleges the contribution was illegal.

On Aug. 7, Collins took part in a celebration with Navatek LLC in Portland, Maine, the largest city in her home state.



U.S. Sen. Susan Collins/2019


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U.S. Sen. Susan Collins, center, poses for a photo with Navatek CEO Martin Kao, second from left, during an August celebration of an \$8 million contract award.

A member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Collins was there to congratulate Navatek, which is headquartered in Hawaii, for winning a contract from the U.S. Navy Office of Naval Research to work with another Maine firm on developing safer hulls and hybrid-electric propulsion systems for military vessels.

“Maine is home to the best shipbuilders in the world, and our state has long had an integral role in our national security,” Collins said in [a press release](#) about the contract.

“As a senior member of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, I strongly advocated for the funding that made this research possible and am so proud of the work Navatek and other Maine industries do to support our Navy and our nation’s defense.”

Collins was joined by Navatek’s CEO Martin Kao, whose business, according to government procurement data, earns tens of millions of dollars through federal contracts, mostly from the U.S. Defense Department.

Campaign finance reports show Kao recently became a major donor to Collins’ campaign, maxing out his contributions to the Republican senator as she seeks re-election.

Collins isn’t the only beneficiary of Kao’s largesse, however. He’s donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to candidates in recent years, including members of Hawaii’s own federal delegation.

Hawaii Sens. Brian Schatz and Mazie Hirono have received thousands of dollars as have U.S. Rep. Tulsi Gabbard and the late Hawaii Congressman Mark Takai.

Kao spreads his money around in other states as well. So far this cycle he’s maxed out his contributions to Democratic senators Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin, Chris Coons of Delaware, Gary Peters of Michigan and Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire.

Collins holds one of the most influential swing votes in Washington, and Democrats, upset with her votes on impeachment and Brett Kavanaugh’s confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court, hope to [flip her seat](#) from red to blue.

As a result there’s a lot [outside money](#) flowing into her race, especially from beyond the borders of Maine.

That’s one reason the Society of Young Women Scientist and Engineers LLC came to the attention of the [Campaign Legal Center](#), a nonpartisan Washington, D.C.-based watchdog focused on money in politics.

The Campaign Legal Center asked the FEC to investigate the LLC’s



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\$150,000 donation, saying it appeared to be illegal, in part because there's no record of the Society of Young Women Scientist and Engineers having legitimate income. The donation was made Dec. 31.

Instead, the legal center argued, it appears the company, which was created Nov. 26, was set up as a dark money front to mask the true identity of the donor to the pro-Collins super PAC.

The only name associated with the organization is Jennifer Lam, which Hawaii business records lists as the company's registered agent and manager.



This U.S. Post Office in downtown Honolulu is where the Society of Young Women Scientist and Engineers LLC lists its address.

Kao's wife's name is Tiffany Jennifer Lam. She has donated the maximum amount — \$5,600 — to Collins, FEC records show.

Lam lists her profession as policy advisor for the Consumer Coalition For Quality Healthcare.

FEC records show Kao also donated \$5,600 to Collins between 2018 and 2019, which is the maximum allowable under federal rules.

Civil Beat reached out to Kao for an interview through a Navatek spokesman, but did not receive a response.

Additionally, a number of Navatek employees and their relatives also donated the maximum allowed to Collins' campaign, adding tens of thousands of dollars to her bid to stay in office.

Navatek's chief financial officer, Clifford Chen, and the company's accountant, Lawrence Lum Kee, each gave \$5,600 to Collins on the same day, Sept. 19.

Nine days later, on Sept. 26, Lum Kee's wife, Joy, gave another \$5,600. Hsiu Chuan Chen, who appears to be related to Clifford Chen and owns property in Honolulu with him, also donated the maximum amount that day.

Other members of Kao's family also donated to Collins. In addition to Navatek, Kao is the president of The Marty and Mickey Kao

Foundation, a family run nonprofit formed in January 2019 with a mission to expand educational opportunities for children.



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According to the foundation's website, the board members include Kao and his wife, Tiffany Lam, as well as Rachel Kao and George Kao, who list addresses in California. Federal Election Commission records show Tiffany Lam, Rachel Kao and George Kao all donated \$5,600 to Collins 2020 bid for re-election.

Many of the donations came on the same day, Aug. 18, which was less than two weeks after Collins visited Navatek's offices in Portland to celebrate its contract.

Others making maximum donations to Collins' campaign that day include Joann Nakano Lam and Christopher Michael Lam, both of whom listed the same Beverly Hills, California address that's one of several listed on the Marty and Mickey Kao Foundation website.

Joann Nakano Lam is listed in the reports as a retiree while Christopher Michael Lam said he worked as an electronics engineer for Home Theater Solutions, a company that [had been registered](#) to do business in Hawaii.

He wasn't the only Christopher Lam to donate to Collins that day. The FEC reports list two other people, both living in Hawaii, who gave similar names.

According to the records, Christopher-Michael T. Lam, who listed his occupation as an engineer at [NIWC Pacific](#), donated \$5,600 to Collins' campaign the same day as Christopher Michael Lam. The NIWC is the Naval Information Warfare Center, which supports the military's intelligence, cyber and surveillance efforts.



The P.O. Box number listed on the FEC paperwork for the Society of Young Women Scientist and Engineers LLC is hidden by black glass.

Another Christopher Lam — who's listed in the records as Christopher Maxim Tory Lam — gave another \$5,600 the same day. Christopher

Maxim Tory Lam listed his occupation as an IT director for the state of Hawaii. Records [show](#) there is a Christopher Lam with that title working for the Hawaii State Senate.

Civil Beat left a message with Lam at his Senate office.

In general, Collins doesn't raise a lot of money out of Hawaii, which leans heavily Democratic.

A Civil Beat review of Federal Election Commission records from 2007 through 2019 show that her campaign received \$56,600 in reportable contributions from donors who listed an address in the Aloha State.

That's only a fraction of the more than \$12 million she took in from individual donors during that time. When omitting the Kaos, Lams and other Navatek employees and their families the amount Collins raised from Hawaii donors shrinks to \$10,800 over 14 years.

Much of that money can be attributed to two donors — Maui real estate developer Everett Dowling and former Hawaii Gov. Linda Lingle, who is a Republican.

Records show Dowling maxed out his contributions in the current cycle by giving \$5,600 to Collins' campaign. He donated \$1,000 of that on Oct. 8, 2018, just after she voted to confirm Brett Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Lingle on the other hand donated her money in two separate election cycles, once in 2008 and again in 2014.

Another name that sticks out among Hawaii donors is Pat Saiki, a former U.S. congresswoman who served the state as a member of the Republican Party. Saiki donated \$100 to Collins's campaign in June.

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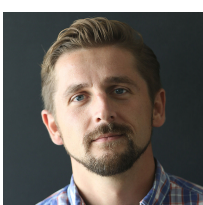
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